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ABSTRACT

A study of syntactic variation in Spanish spoken by native speakers in the United States examined patterns of variation in different areas of the country. High school students in larger Hispanic communities throughout the country were surveyed concerning their own and their parents' demographic characteristics and their Spanish speaking, listening, and reading patterns. All had been educated in English-language schools and lived in an English-dominant culture. Based on this information, 30 students were selected for further study. In interviews, students were presented with drawings indicating different sociolinguistic situations and asked to speak about similar personal experiences. The interviews, recorded and transcribed, were then analyzed for syntactic patterns. Three areas of variation were identified: (1) omission of certain elements, particularly articles, prepositions, pronouns, and to a lesser extent, conjunctions; (2) elements added unnecessarily, including prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions; and (3) element misapplication, including prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, adverbs, and adjectives. Examples of each pattern are offered. Results indicate similar patterns of variation in different geographic areas, and also show variations similar to those of Spanish-as-a-Second-Language learners. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Syntactic Variation of Spanish in the United States

Elizabeth Martinez

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Elizabeth Martínez

SYNTACTIC VARIATION OF SPANISH IN THE UNITED STATES

1. Introduction.

The changes that occur when a non-dominant language is in contact with its dominant counterpart in any given society may be considered language variation. This, in turn, may be the result of language loss, dialectal variation brought from regions of the native country, or the non-acquisition of certain linguistic features. Language loss is defined by Andersen (1982) as "language evolution" with a loss of proficiency. Campbell and Muntzel (1989) believe it is a "gradual death" where there is a shift to the dominant language. Freed's (1982) definition is that of a "declining use of the mother tongue" for whatever reason, i.e. political, social, etc. Dialectal or regional variations may also cause language variety of the non-dominant language within a community. Immigrants may have brought these differences with them and they have remained a standard for the community. The non-acquisition of certain linguistic features may be caused by its non-existence in the dominant language or its non-existence in the regional dialect.

Spanish in the United States, a minority language in contact, has undergone many changes from what is considered the norm[1]. However this does not, by any means, indicate that Spanish in the United States is in danger of becoming obsolescent. The wide variety of mass media and the influx of Hispanic immigrants in many areas of the country have contributed to the continuous growth of the language. Its variation is quite unique due to the numerous different populations and generations of Hispanics

represented.

Linguists, over the years, have focused on the many stages of processing language in a contact situation. In the U.S., there are Hispanic speakers that are: 1.) monolingual Spanish (language maintenance); 2.) bilingual (bilingualism); 3.) semifluent (language attrition and bilingualism); and 4.) monolingual English (language shift). These stages of change may occur from generation to generation, or they may remain stagnant at some point. This may depend on the external and/or psychological factors involved in the individual's life. Whatever the reason or final stage, Spanish, as any language in contact, will undergo processes of change influenced by many factors. Silva-Corvalán (1993), defines the processes of bilingualism or second language learning as follows: 1.) transfer, the result of a non-dominant language receiving forms from the dominant one; 2.) negative transfer, the loss of a grammatical category in the L^2, where it does not exist in the L^1; and 3.) simplification, the generalization of rules leading toward the possible loss of certain forms.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the syntactic variation of the informal spoken language of a group of Spanish speakers in the United States to determine if there are similar patterns in the types of element changes indicated. The results of this study suggest the possibility of similar patterns of language variation being used by the majority of Spanish speakers in the United States. The three main areas identified were the

omission, addition, and misapplication of elements. These areas were then subdivided to analyze the various parts of speech demonstrating change, e.g. articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, adjectives, and adverbs.

2. Methodology.

2.1. Subjects.

High schools in the larger Hispanic communities throughout the country were asked to participate in a national study for *Spanish in the U.S.*[2] Numerous Spanish speaking students between grades nine and twelve were first asked to fill out a socio-linguistic questionnaire[3] in order to determine: 1.) parent's background information, e.g. place of birth, educational status, type of work they do; 2.) student's background information, e.g. place of birth, education, time spent in a Hispanic speaking country; 3.) how often they spoke Spanish at home, in school, and in their neighborhood; 4.) with whom they spoke Spanish, e.g. friends, parents, teachers, grandparents, or others; 5.) how often they read Spanish books, magazines, or newspapers; and 6.) how often they watched television shows in Spanish or listened to Spanish radio. The results indicated that 1.) the subjects were either first or second generation Hispanics in the United States with little time spent in a Hispanic speaking country (maximum 2 weeks at a given time); 2.) the educational background and type of work of the parents varied; 3.) Spanish was the dominant language spoken at home, in the neighborhood, and with relatives

and friends; and 4.) English was the dominant language for listening and reading input, i.e. reading materials, television and radio.

All of these students were educated in the American school system from age six with some type of high school Spanish instruction, i.e. in a bilingual program or as a foreign language subject. Their speaking ability was native-like[4].

Based on the information from the sociolinguistic questionnaires, thirty students from various high schools throughout the Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast United States were selected to participate in this research study.

2.2. Materials and Procedures

The entire study was based on a series of twelve socio-linguistic situational drawings[5]. A questionnaire accompanied each situation, which guided the informants to speak about a personal experience similar to the situations presented (e.g. Háblame de una experiencia interesante que tuviste en la escuela). These texts allowed for natural and spontaneous language which provided a more valid assessment of syntactic variation in spoken Spanish. Each interviewer was shown a set of six different drawings.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and were recorded with the permission of the informants. These were then transcribed to analyze and determine what types of variation were occurring in the informal spoken language and whether any one part of speech demonstrated a greater amount of change.

3. Analysis and Results.

3.1. Element Omission.

The analysis of this category has indicated greater element omission than that of addition and misapplication. The elements mostly omitted were articles, prepositions and pronouns. Omitted items will be indicated in parenthesis and italicized.

3.1.1. Articles.

There were two prominent and consistent patterns of omission of the definite article.

First, the most common omission was triggered by the verb *jugar*. Syntactically, in Spanish, this verb is followed by both the preposition *a* and a definite article when indicating a specific sports event (e.g I play tennis/yo juego al tenis), however there were many examples[6] where both the preposition and the article omission were observed: "Juegan (*a la*) pelota...", "...juegan (*al*) béisbol...", and "...jugamos (*al*) fútbol...". This phenomenon, although different from what is considered "the norm", is frequently seen among bilingual speakers, Spanish as a second language learners (herein referred to as SSL speakers), and has even become more acceptable among native speakers.

Second, article omission was found within relative clauses: "...en el parque (*al*) que yo voy...", and "...dependiendo del parque (*al*) que vaya...". Since sentences with subordinate clauses become syntactically more complex, the level of difficulty is greater when the language being used is not the dominant one; therefore creating more variation. English may also

be a factor in this case of omission, since the marker to introduce the clause is usually omitted, e.g. The park you went to was Chapultepec./ El parque (*al que*) fuiste era Chapultepec.

In an overview of omitted articles, a possible explanation for such a phenomenon may imply simplification; where articles are a lesser important part of speech for communication. Simplification is a common phenomenon in language contact situations. Silva-Corvalán (1990) indicates this as being characteristic of bilingualism; which is the process that these subjects are undergoing.

3.1.2. Prepositions.

The preposition *a* was omitted most frequently. As mentioned above, here too, many of the variations included the verb *jugar*: "...jugar (*al*) baloncesto...", and "...juegan (*al*) béisbol...". This, once again, appears to have become a common phenomenon in U.S. Spanish, as well as other Spanish varieties. The preposition *a*, which, in Spanish, accompanies both the direct object referring to a person and the indirect object, tended to be eliminated by several informants: "Llamar (*a*) los bomberos...", "...ahí conocí (*a*) muchos amigos...", and "...que llame (*a*) la policía...". This ungrammatical omission of *a* is another feature commonly encountered in the SSL learner's speech. With the SSL learner, it is likely that non-salient rules take longer to be assimilated; however, how does one explain this omission from the native Spanish speaker? Could English be the influencing factor in this case? Or, could this be a phenomenon that was never

acquired by these speakers?

The use of *a* in a prepositional phrase clarifying an indirect object is another grammatical phenomenon causing elimination: "...le preguntamos (*a*) una policía...", and "...y (*a*) nosotros no gustaba..."

The preposition *en* was observed as the second largest category for omission variation, although it provided fewer examples than *a*: "...monto (*en*) bicicleta...", "...Que se fije todavía (*en*) los carros...", and "...estoy (*en*) la escuela...". One possible explanation for the omission of *a* and *en* might be the result of the speaker's avoidance of these problematic prepositions. The confusion of these two prepositions may be attributed to their English translations, where both *a* and *en* may mean *at* and *in* (eg. Estoy en la boda=I am at the wedding or I am in the wedding).

As seen in this section, the data showed similar patterns of variation which, on the one hand, may indicate English as being a major influencing factor for this loss, i.e. English non-existence versus Spanish existence, e.g. *juego (al) béisbol/I play baseball* and *conocí (a) muchos amigos/I met many friends*. On the other hand, simplification of language may be used to suit individual and/or community needs as a common phenomenon.

3.1.3. Pronouns.

The types of elements omitted were pronouns for direct and indirect objects, reflexives, with relative clauses, and impersonal/passives.

The pronoun more prominently omitted, as observed in the data, was that of the direct object: "...se me ha quemado una camisa, pero nunca le (*lo*) dije a nadie; la escondí..." and "...pero no, nunca le (*lo*) dije a mi mamá, la escondí y ella nunca la vio..."

Another phenomenon including both the omission of clitics for direct and indirect object with the infinitive or present participle: "...por unas cosas, los días...no puedo decir(*lo*) bien..."(tells how he can not explain what he wants to say), "...Buscamos el mapa para encontrar y poder sacar(*nos*)" (*sacar* is used incorrectly, should be ir or salir), and "...dar(*les*) las invitaciones a mis amigas..." Simplification is one possible explanation for this phenomenon, where the informants provided the antecedent or clarification phrase and therefore did not provide the pronoun. The uncertainty of its placement when a participle or infinitive is present may have led to total elimination of the pronoun.

Reflexives, widely used in the Spanish language, provided various instances of variation: "...la mayoría de la gente que (*se*) quedaron adentro murió...", and "...para la gente (*se*) cayera." Other reflexive changes were: "...cuando (*me*) desperté...", "...para ver si (*se*) apaga...el fuego", and "...una tienda que...que (*se*) llama Sánchez."

Impersonal/passive *se*, used quite frequently for instructions, lists or directions, provided the following variations: "...primero le jalla...(*se*) halla un número y...",

"...tratarla de planchar y (*se*) pone la plancha.", "...(*se*) pone la olla...", and "...(*se*) pone el arroz...". This phenomenon, so very different for the SSL learner because it does not exist in English, is very commonly used among Hispanic speakers. In paralleling the two languages, English and Spanish, the bilingual or semifluent speaker may either eliminate those grammatical structures, where there are no equivalents in the dominant language; or perhaps, s/he did not ever acquire this structure.

It is difficult to determine any one factor as the cause of language change with the native Spanish speaker in the U.S. Several of the variations that occurred with these subjects, do not exist in English, i.e. reflexive verbs per se, the use of pronouns with the indirect object, and the common Spanish construction of *se* when a passive or an impersonal subject is present. Whether the elimination of these pronouns is caused by English interference, simplification or the lack of acquisition is inconclusive.

3.1.4. Conjunctions.

The conjunction *que*, when introducing a clause was the main variation type found in this section: "...creo (*que*) nunca se me va...", "...y fue (*que*) me sentí...", "...creo (*que*) él...", "...cuando vimos (*que*) era la casa...", and "...tiene uno (*que*) a abonarla...". The verb *creer* seemed to trigger this elimination in most of the examples. *That*, the English equivalent to *que* is often omitted with direct object and predicate clauses and may therefore be the cause for this elimination.

The consistent omission of the conjunction *que* leads to the possible conclusion that English is a major factor in this variation.

In an overall view of the section on Element Omission, the evidence showed that the problematic areas remained in three major categories: articles, prepositions and pronouns. There were some significant similarities of variation in article and preposition elimination, however these specifically involved the verb *jugar*. In which case, if one element was missing, the other was too, ie. article/preposition. The evidence within the data does not indicate any one factor, i.e. overgeneralization, English influence, or simplification, as the reason for variation; nor does it show common processes occurring that would indicate the creation of certain patterns for the variability. What was apparent however, was the similarity in the speech parts that varied (i.e. articles, prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions) between native speakers and SSL speakers.

3.2. Element Addition.

In the data for this study, examples where certain elements were unnecessarily added to the informants' spoken texts were found. The elements included: prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions. The elements added will be indicated in italics.

3.2.1. Prepositions.

The preposition *de* was one of the more frequently added. On two occasions, it appeared with the verb *deber*: "...cuando deben *de* cruzar una luz..." and "...se debe *de* parar." The verb *deber*

(obligation) and *deber de* (supposition) are semantically different. One example supplied semantic redundancy with the verb *bajar/to go down*: "...una vez, este, bajando *de* las escaleras me caí..." In this last example, within the context provided by the informant, *escaleras* meant staircase and not ladder. Had escaleras meant ladder, then the preposition *de* would have been appropriate.

The preposition *a* appeared with the verb *tratar*: "...y *a* tratar de...", "...y *a* tratar de ap..." and "...y *a* tratar de rescatar..."

3.2.2. Pronouns.

Reflexive pronouns demonstrated variation also: "Cuando *me* tuvo un...para sacármelo...", "...me senté allí y *me* esperé...", "...porque todos *se* comenzaron a reír.", "...*me* regresé y le pregunté...", "...unos cajones que *se* trabajan ahí...", "...me lavo, *me* desayuno...", and "...*nos* volvíamos a buscar ese place...", etc. The possible causes for these differences might be attributed to the overgeneralization of reflexive markers. In examples like *reírse* or *irse*, the reflexive marker indicates a semantic variation, i.e. *reír=to laugh* vs. *reírse=to laugh about*, and *ir=to go* vs. *irse=to go away*. In some of the other instances, the use of one reflexive verb may have triggered the addition of the other, e.g. me senté y me esperé. However, since reflexives in Spanish tend to be used to indicate emphasis, it is inconclusive to determine the cause of the added element.

Other pronouns, such as those of the direct and indirect

object were observed to be added: "...*me* siguió diciéndome...", and "...trataba de...*l*'apagarlo..." This phenomenon was unique to verbs composed of two parts, i.e. conjugated verb and an infinitive, gerund or past participle. One pronoun was placed before the conjugated verb and the other after the non conjugated verb form. In most cases in Spanish, there is the option to place the pronoun before the conjugated verb or after the gerund or infinitive. Therefore confusion of pronoun placement may be the cause for the addition.

3.2.3. Conjunctions.

The conjunction *si* caused some confusion for the informants. In each instance where an *if* clause was provided, *que* either introduced the resultant clause, or preceded the *if* clause : "...nada más me miró como si, *que* si estaba loca...", "...si no viene ningún carro, *que* puede cruzar, *que* si viene un carro que se quede en la esquina...", and "...si les hablan a las plantas *que* crecen." The complex sentence, involving clauses appears to provoke the change.

In the area of Element Addition, most of the variation was indicated in the categories of prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions. Three factors may be considered for the similarities of syntactic variation by adding elements: 1.) overgeneralization, in the cases where pronouns were repeated or used with non-reflexive verbs, 2.) English influence, and 3.) non-acquisition.

3.3. Element Misapplication.

In the data analyzed, a third variation phenomenon was observed: element misapplication of prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, adverbs and adjectives. The correct element is presented in parenthesis and italicized.

3.3.1. Prepositions.

The prepositions misapplied most frequently were *a* and *en*. On various occasions the interchanging of *a* and *en* occurred: "...y aquí a (*en*) high school", "...lo anunciaron al (*en*) frente de la clase que era mi cumpleaños...", "...ahí en (*a*) los lados...", "...me subo en (*a*) la troca...", "...no iba yo en (*a*) la escuela...", and "...yo fui en (*a*) una fiesta cerca de mi casa...". These examples demonstrated some confusion with the uses of the preposition *a* indicating "motion toward" and *en* which implies "location".

In other examples *a* replaced the prepositions *por* or *para*: "...garr...a (*para*) escoger que necesitamos...", "...se le fueron los frenos...se fue a (*para*) una barranca...", and "...estudio a (*por*) la noche..." English influence appeared to be one of the factors in this phenomenon. The misapplication of the preposition *a* and *para* may be explained by the fact that both indicate destination and this is a phenomenon common in Mexican Spanish.

Several examples of variation with *por* and *para* were also found: "...y eso fue muy difícil por (*para*) mí", "...y pásale pá (*por*) arriba...", "...escondida para (*por*) 'cá...", and "...necesitaba pagar para (*por*) la ventana..."

Evidence from the data showed changes of discrimination among such prepositions as *a*, *para*, *por*, and *en*. Aside from these, confusion with the application of *de* and the use of several prepositions to replace *por* were apparent.

3.3.2. Pronouns.

Variations of relative pronouns were most apparent in the data, this once again involved the complex sentences: "...hablando de (*lo que*) que ha pasado...", "...a escoger (*lo que*) que necesitamos...", "...que juegan en el parque (*al que*) que yo voy...", and "...a todos cuales (*los que*) quieren venir..."

3.3.3. Conjunctions.

Conjunctions introducing the subordinate clause appeared to be the most commonly misused, i.e. *para que*, *hasta que*, *que*: "...tienes que ir a dar comida y luego arreglar la casa, solamente que (*para que*) se vea bien...", "...llamaron a una grúa que (*para que*) vengan a buscar el carro...", "Estudio muy duro, muy duro hasta cuando (*hasta que*) lo grabo en mi mente.", "...se quede en la esquina y espera que (*hasta que*) no hay carros más nada...", and "...las... *pá' que* (*que*) necesitamos..." The use of subordinate clauses illustrated several different phenomena: 1.) compound conjunctions (e.g. *para que*, *hasta que*, etc.) were simplified to *que*; 2.) *que* was compounded (e.g. *para que* for *que*); and 3.) syntactically incorrect conjunctions were used (e.g. *cuando* for *mientras*).

The patterns observed, seem to demonstrate various processes

of misapplied subordinate conjunctions. The factors considered for such variation are simplification and overgeneralization.

3.3.4. Adverbs.

Several types of variation were found in the misapplication of adverbs. Some of these involved adverbs and adjectives that have the same or similar forms, where the context determines the function within the sentence. Sentence negation also provided evidence of loss.

One of the observations of variation indicated misused indefinite words. In Spanish, negation of a sentence is constructed by adding the adverb *no* and if any other indefinite term is required it too must be negative (e.g. *nada*, *nadie*, etc.). One occurrence of this was seen: "No he tenido...algo (*nada*) así." This example may simply be explained with English interference, since its grammar does not permit double negatives within the sentence. Spanish, on the other hand does and must provide the negative word when the sentence is negative.

The second observation of variation included those adverbs/adjectives such as *mucho*, *bien/bueno*: "...le gustaba mucha (*mucho*)..." and "...y luego se enojó mucha (*mucho*)...", "...no podía hacer muchos (*mucho*)...", and "...o sea, ponen bien en la mesa..." (preparan/ponen una *buena* mesa). *Mucha*, in both of these examples functioned as an adverb, and therefore is invariable. The informant's variation of this form may be explained by the confusion with the adjective of the same form. The function of *mucho* within the sentence is determined by context, i.e. if it

modifies a noun, it is an adjective; and if it modifies a verb, it is an adverb.

Although *bien* is always an adverb and *bueno* an adjective, the similarity in form has led to variation by interchanging these. This phenomenon may be caused by English influence, since the adjective *good* is being used more and more as an adverb.

3.3.5. Adjectives.

The variations that were apparent in this section, were limited to two categories, 1.) negative/indefinite words: "No he tenido una experiencia...", "No miré un (*ningún*) accidente"; and 2.) possessive adjectives: "...me pongo mi (*el*) reloj...", "...me cojo mis (*los*) libros...", "...me quebró mi (*la*) mano..." and "...me escondieron mis (*los*) zapatos...". The possessive adjective is redundant, since the reflexive and indirect object pronouns indicate the possessor.

The similarities in this section provided evidence of variation patterns that may involve English influence as a major factor. Whereas in Spanish possession may be indicated by using a reflexive verb, in English possessive adjectives are applied. Double negatives do not exist in English, and this may cause the misapplication of the indefinite where a negative word is required in Spanish.

4. Conclusion.

These data have illustrated certain variation patterns that are similar in the speech of the native Spanish speakers in the United States.

Although the informants selected to participate in this study live in Hispanic communities and Spanish is the dominant language in their home, they have been educated in American schools from age six and spend most of their day in school, where English is the dominant language. This has affected their fluency in the first language. They have become, what Lipski (1993) refers to as semifluent speakers. In his explanation of the difference between the "traditional bilingual" speaker, the "native" speaker, and the "semifluent" speaker, he identifies the *semifluent* speaker as one who has the ability to process many types of language and has superior knowledge of the language, however s/he will commit grammatical errors similar to those of the SSL speaker. This phenomenon of grammatical error "similarities in second language acquisition and first language loss" was also observed in Martínez (1994).

This study has demonstrated a similarity in patterns of variation among Spanish speakers in the United States with some observations of similar variation types between Spanish first language loss and Spanish as a second language speakers. This raises the question of what possible factors may cause or aid in these grammatical variations. The factors to be considered should be multiple: 1.) English influence, 2.) simplification of the language, 3.) overgeneralization of certain grammar rules acquired in a natural setting or through learning environment, and/or 4.) unawareness of specific grammatical variations, i.e. non-acquisition. No one factor can be proven to be responsible

for language variation, in fact, it is more of a combination of these, as well as sociological factors (i.e. community, domain, country of origin, or location within the U.S.), that lead to language change.

The results observed in these data show variation patterns similar to those of Spanish as a second language learners, i.e. *por* vs *para*, reflexive pronouns, impersonal/passive *se*, elimination of articles, etc. This indicates a need for further research and data collection to compare the similarities in the variations of Spanish in first language speakers and second language learners. Martínez (1994) continues to explore this research comparing data collected from both Spanish as a first language and Spanish as a second language.

NOTES

[1] The definition of "norm" is considered a standard Spanish taught to students learning Spanish as a second language and based on the standards of the Real Academia's (1983), *Esbozo de una Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* and Gili Gaya's (1982) *Curso Superior de Sintaxis Española*.

[2] The data used in this study was taken from data collected for the national project *Spanish in the U.S.* conducted by Manuel Alvar and Arnulfo Ramírez in 1987. This data appears Martínez's dissertation, as well and in her more recent book *Morpho-Syntactic Erosion between Two Generational Groups of Spanish Speakers in the United States.*

[3] The Sociolinguistic Questionnaire used was created by Arnulfo Ramírez for the national project *Spanish in the U.S.*

[4] *Native-like* can be defined similarly to Lipski's (1993) explanation of the semifluent speaker, "one who has the ability to process many types of language and has superior knowledge of the language, however s/he will commit grammatical errors similar to those of the SSL."

[5] The Sociolinguistic drawings and their accompanying questionnaires were created at the University at Albany, SUNY under the supervision of Arnulfo Ramírez for the national project *Spanish in the U.S.*

[6] The examples presented in this article are just a small sample of those that were collected. A listing of all of the

examples are presented in Martínez's (1993) book. The following tables indicate the total number of variations of syntactic elements:

	Omitted	Added	Misapplied
Art.	40	05	03
Prep.	69	40	46
Pron.	40	22	23
Conj.	14	12	14
Adv.	01	02	09
Adj.	00	01	08

Based on 30 subjects the number of informants providing these variations is as follows:

	Omitted	Added	Misapplied
Art.	20	05	03
Prep.	22	22	22
Pron.	17	13	15
Conj.	08	10	12
Adv.	01	02	06
Adj.	00	01	06

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